Monitoring and evaluating a volunteer programme

Summary

Most organisations will keep records of numbers of volunteers, volunteer hours and so on for funding applications and internal records. This guidance is intended to introduce the principles behind monitoring and evaluation, and why it is beneficial for the development of volunteering programmes.

This Information Sheet covers:
- Why monitor and evaluate a volunteer programme?
- What is monitoring?
- What is evaluation?
- Identifying outcomes and outputs to be measured
- How can I gather information to measure outputs and outcomes?
- How to use the information to improve your volunteer programme
- Other resources available

Monitoring and evaluation does not have to be too time consuming. It can be on one aspect of your volunteer involvement, or on the whole programme. More importantly, it's not just a paper exercise. It should tell you where you are going wrong (as well as what's working well), and guide you on the steps you can take to improve things.

Why monitor and evaluate a volunteer programme?

- To measure the quality of the volunteers' experience within your organisation
- To identify the impact that volunteers have on your organisation, both in terms of their contribution and their economic value
- To identify areas in your volunteer programme that may need improvement
- Funders may require you to monitor and evaluate your volunteer programme

What is monitoring?

Monitoring is the process of collecting information on the work that takes place within your organisation, so that your processes and procedures can be reviewed and updated as necessary. Information for monitoring can be collected daily, monthly or quarterly.

What is evaluation?

Evaluation involves analysing the information you have collected to answer questions about how well the volunteer programme is doing, and to identify any gaps and improvements you can make. This can be done on a six monthly or annual basis.

Evaluation literature often refers to 'inputs', 'outputs' and 'outcomes'.

Inputs are the time, money, and resources that enable you to operate your volunteer programme. **Outputs** are quantitative measures such as facts, figures and statistics. These are known as 'hard' data.

Outcomes are the changes that the volunteer programme has made to the organisation and its members, and includes qualitative impacts such as enabling clients to develop new skills and boost their confidence. This is known as 'soft' data, and will probably play a bigger role in your evaluation process than 'hard' data, although facts and figures are important too. Outputs and outcomes are measured by performance indicators, which help you assess how well your volunteering programme is doing.

Identifying outcomes and outputs to be measured

The first step in monitoring and evaluating a volunteer programme is to identify your aims and objectives, so that you can measure the outputs and outcomes of your volunteering programme. **Outputs** can include information such as:

- How diverse are our volunteers?
- How successful are our recruitment methods?
- How well do we retain volunteers?
- How did our volunteers find out about our volunteering opportunities?
- What is the economic value of volunteers to the organisation?

Outcomes may include:
- What's the volunteer experience?
- Are volunteers properly supported?
- Are policies and procedures relevant?
- How does the training we provide enhance the volunteer experience?
- Are the volunteers happy?
- Are the clients happy?
- How much do volunteers contribute towards the organisation?
- In what ways have volunteers benefited the organisation?
- How has volunteer involvement benefited the clients?
- Is there a suitable way of thanking volunteers?

Don't forget that as your organisation changes and evolves, you may need to re-evaluate if there is still a need for volunteers.

Once you have identified the information you need, the next step is to work out the best method of obtaining that information.

How can I gather information to measure outputs and outcomes?

To measure your **outputs** you will need to collect facts and figures. This may involve keeping records and producing statistics. Demographic information such as age, gender and ethnicity will give you a breakdown of your volunteer profile. This is useful for:

- Working out how diverse your volunteers are, as this can help you target certain areas or groups in your local community that may be underrepresented, which will then help you to implement your equal opportunities policy
- Planning future recruitment campaigns by keeping a record of how volunteers found out about the volunteering opportunities
- Identifying patterns in volunteer turnover, to help raise retention levels
- Identifying how accessible your volunteering programme is in accordance with the spirit of the Disability Discrimination Act 1998.

Demographic information on the recruitment process can be gathered through a monitoring form, alongside an application form if one is used. (Please note that any information held about volunteers will need to be compliant with the Data Protection Act 1995. All monitoring records need to be stored safely and securely. Please visit http://www.ico.gov.uk for further information.)

Keeping attendance records for training and meetings will help you identify if there are any issues with dates, times and venues that these are held. If there are, then you can ask the volunteers if there is a better day/ time/ venue for meetings or training that will enable them to attend.

Outcomes are qualitative, so rely on feedback from the volunteers, staff and clients within your organisation. Ensure that they know why you are collecting information and the purpose it will be used for. Questionnaires are an obvious choice for gathering information but be aware that some volunteers will want to escape the bureaucracy that they may encounter elsewhere, and may not complete the forms. For some people, filling in forms is a daunting experience, so try to think of a way of recording information that doesn't encroach on people's time or goodwill too much.

An informal group discussion is a useful way of finding out people's opinions, and it enables everyone to contribute. As a Volunteer Manager, you will need to record all the comments made. Structure the discussion by asking relevant questions, but remain objective to ensure that you don't influence the debate. The benefits of a discussion are that the feedback you receive is spontaneous and the discussion can be limited to a specific time frame so that you can collect information very quickly. This is a good method to use with staff and clients, as they can get involved in the monitoring and evaluation process without completing reams of paperwork. It will help you to assess the contribution that volunteers make to your organisation, and if your clients and staff are happy with how volunteers are involved in the organisation.

If your organisation runs activities, you could collect comments from staff, volunteers and clients after each activity, and keep this information together so that it can be analysed at a later date.

Informal one-to-one reviews with each or a sample of volunteers will enable you to identify the volunteer experience and discuss the quality and relevance of training, policies, procedures and support. If possible, arrange for the review to be carried out by someone who does not supervise the volunteer on a daily basis, because this will avoid the volunteer being inhibited from giving full answers.

Having a list of open questions will give the review a structure, and will also give your volunteer time to prepare their comments and answer openly and honestly. Some questions to ask include:

- What have you enjoyed most/ least about your volunteering over the last 6 months/ year?
- What do you consider to be your strengths/ weaknesses?
- Do you require training?
- What was your aim/ reason for volunteering, and have you achieved this?
- What improvements/ volunteering opportunities would you like to see within the organisation?

These questions give the volunteer the opportunity to discuss their experiences, identify any training needs that they may have, and explore how their role could be developed or tailored to suit their changing needs or the changing needs of the organisation. Ensure that the volunteer is aware that this is not an appraisal of them, but an opportunity for them to provide feedback on the organisation and its activities. This will help them to feel they are contributing to the organisation's development, which will demonstrate the value your organisation places on volunteers. Some of these questions could also be asked at regular supervision sessions, again to help you monitor how the organisation has delivered in general.

Any volunteers who receive training should also be given the opportunity to feed back about their experience of it. A training evaluation sheet could include questions such as the usefulness of resource/ training materials, which parts of the training the volunteer liked/ disliked and what could be improved. If there is room for improvement, act upon it as part of your evaluation.

Don't forget that the more contact you have with volunteers and clients, the more opportunities you have for asking for feedback. You can also use this as an opportunity to deal with any issues as they arise, and to encourage people to make new suggestions.

Even if you don't have many other monitoring procedures in place, you could hold exit interviews. Exit interviews are useful because they can indicate how things are going, and you may be able to identify trends in why volunteers leave. Volunteers are more likely to be open about their reasons for leaving, especially if someone other than the volunteer's supervisor is conducting the exit interview.

How to use the information to improve your volunteer programme

Once you have gathered the information, you will need to analyse it and interpret it. For **outputs**, this might include: Did you meet the targets you set for volunteer recruitment? Are your volunteers from a wide and diverse range of backgrounds?

What about your **outcomes?** Did you achieve what you set out to do, or were there some unexpected outcomes eg did some volunteers leave to take up paid employment using the skills and experience they learned and developed as volunteers?

You may need to write up your conclusions based on the evidence you have found. When interpreting information, consider if there are any other possible explanations for your findings. Once you have identified gaps, you need to focus on how to make improvements. These need to be realistic, specific and achievable. This may be a good opportunity to review targets for outputs and outcomes.

Volunteer meetings can be a good way of discussing how improvements and changes can be made to your volunteering programme. This will make your volunteers feel involved in the process, and will help you to develop methods to implement the changes. All decisions should be recorded in the minutes of your meetings.

The information you have gathered from your monitoring and evaluation may have identified areas where you might need to seek specialist guidance to improve your volunteering programme. For instance, if you need to evaluate your accessibility you may find a local group who can provide an accessibility audit.

Other resources available

Charities Evaluation Services produce guides on monitoring and evaluation, including a practical toolkit which examines different methods of collecting information for different types of organisation.

Charities Evaluation Services
4 Coldbath Square
London
EC1R 5HL
Tel: 020 7713 5722
Fax: 020 7713 5692
Email: enquiries@ces-vol.org.uk
Website: www.ces-vol.org.uk.

Another useful resource is the **Volunteering Impact Assessment Toolkit,** published by the Institute for Volunteering Research. This toolkit enables organisations to assess the non-economic impact of volunteering on the organisation, the clients, the wider community and on the volunteers themselves. Further information is available at http://www.volunteering.org.uk/Resources/publications/volunteeringtoolkit.htm

It is possible to work out the economic value that volunteers make to your organisation by multiplying the average hourly wage by the number of hours worked by your volunteers. To find out the local hourly wage please contact the **Office for National Statistics** on 0845 601 30 34 or visit http://www.statistics.gov.uk/.

VIVA (Volunteer Investment and Value Audit) enables organisations to accurately measure the economic impact of volunteering by examining their individual situations. VIVA also estimates an hourly wage rate based on the type of volunteering work being undertaken. For further information on VIVA please visit:
http://www.ivr.org.uk/NR/rdonlyres/C07E99EC-3818-4618-A0DB-914ACAD28B65/0/viva2003.pdf

And finally

Remember to evaluate your monitoring and evaluation procedure – did it provide you with the information that you needed? Could information have been collected more easily or efficiently? Is there room for improvement? If so, adapt your procedures for next time.

Further information

VAN Briefing No. 80, July 2004 http://www.voluntaryarts.org/uploaded/map1500.pdf

VIVA - The volunteer investment and value audit: a self help guide
http://www.ivr.org.uk/researchbulletins/

Information Commissioner's Office
http://www.ico.gov.uk

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